

MONICA DE CARDENAS

ARTS

# After a Lost Pregnancy, Artist Danielle Orchard Gives Shape to the Void

BY GRACE EDQUIST

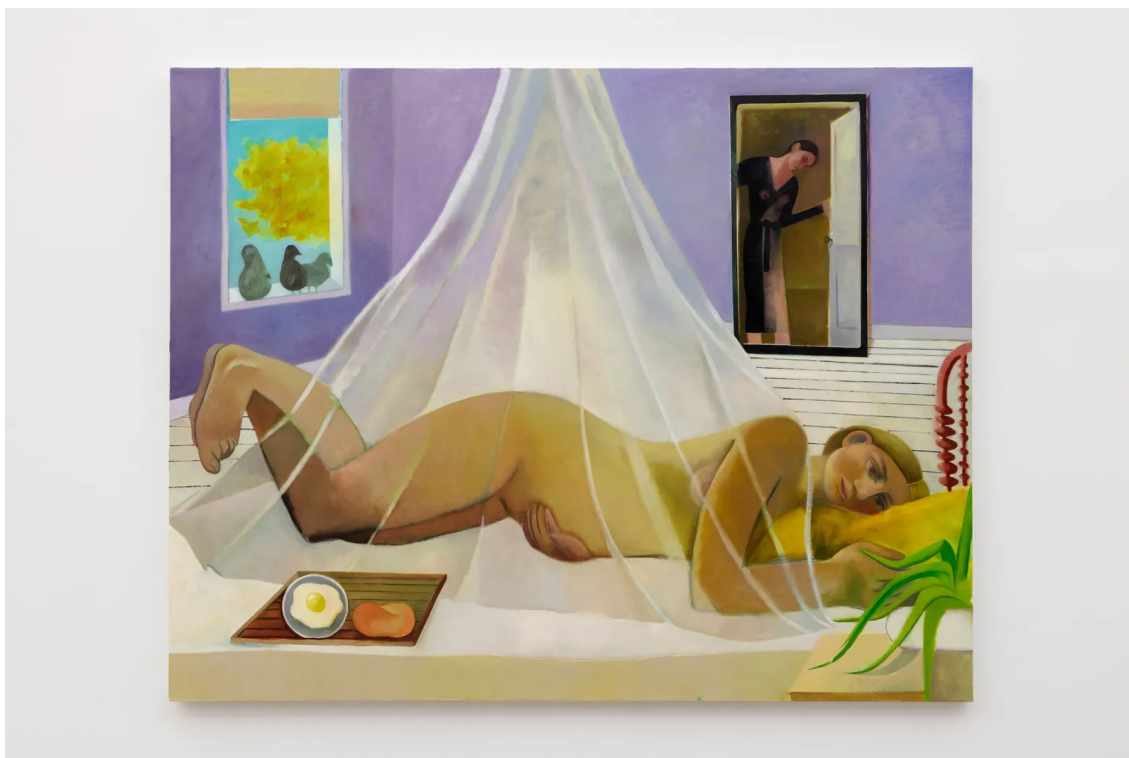
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Photo: Claire Dorn, courtest of Perrotin gallery

VOGUE

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Danielle Orchard, *Our Sympathies (After Wyeth)*, 2023. Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

Danielle Orchard has built up a body of work capturing the daily lives of women—smoking a cigarette, adjusting a bra, bathing, having a drink. Life has many such small moments. But, every so often, something big comes along, infusing what was once mundane with deeper meaning.

Such a tectonic shift happened last year for Orchard when she decided she wanted to have a child. In the Brooklyn-based artist's new show at Perrotin gallery in New York, 10 poignant paintings touch on pregnancy—its promise, its weight, and, sometimes, its loss, as happened to Orchard when hers ended in a miscarriage. "You Are a Serpent Who'll Return to the Ocean" presents vignettes imbued with hope, humor, and grief: Orchard's most personal collection yet.

"I'm a pretty private person," Orchard, 37, told me earlier this week ahead of the show's opening. She had been on the fence about making her pregnancy and miscarriage, an often hidden topic, the focal point of an exhibition. But as she talked to other women who had gone through similar experiences, and sat with her own emotions, it became inevitable. "I just couldn't see any way around it," she says.

It all started last summer when Orchard was in Cap Ferret, on France's Atlantic coast. A drawing she made there turned into *Pêches Plates*, a luminous if uncanny painting with an upside-down figure—nude and Cubist, as Orchard's women tend to be—reclining on a daybed, her head resting on an open book. A bowl of bananas and the titular peaches, a lamp, and an unhooked rotary phone sit on the nightstand, while an impossibly perched martini glass (dirty gin, I'm told) looks on from an armchair. With all these jolly objects and vibrant colors, it's almost easy to miss the defining feature of the work: her shadow belly, a figment of future desire, or present loss.

A similar body, inverted and shadow-bellied, shows up in *A Fallow Field*. These women may look at rest, but they are suspended in unease. There's something eerie, even sinister going on. "That kind of incongruity is something I'm really interested in," Orchard says.

A third distended stomach, this time corporeal, appears in *Our Sympathies (After Wyeth)*. Struck by the ethereal beauty of Andrew Wyeth's 1980 painting *Day Dream*, Orchard made her own version, with a similar veil-like canopy draped over its protagonist and red spindles on the headboard. Originally

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conceived as a depiction of a pregnant woman resting, the picture took on a recuperative note after Orchard's miscarriage. But it's not all gloom: A physics-defying egg and another peach add some levity to the foreground.

Orchard's art-historical references are aplenty. Similar to her homage to Wyeth is *Le Cauchemar*, the nightmare to Picasso's famous dreaming lady in *Le Rêve*. Here the figure's eyes are open, her gaze dispirited. She has the same head tilt, with one breast exposed. But instead of erotic, the mood is melancholic, the figure holding a bird's nest infiltrated by a baby snake. There's a winking Orchardism here too: Look closely at the left side of the painting and you'll see tiny little sperm swimming in the green grapes, a scene from a dream Orchard once had.

Born in Indiana, Orchard took to drawing at a young age. One of six children, she saw art as her private respite, something just for her. She started painting seriously in college, at Indiana University, and then at Hunter College, where she got her MFA in 2013. Since then, her angular figuration—which draws influence from Picasso, Matisse, and the pregnancy imagery of Paula Modersohn-Becker, and contemporary artists like Dana Schutz and Nicole Eisenman—

has quickly gained attention, and admiration. Her painting *Lint*, of a stocking-clad crotch and torso, made for a striking cover of the *Paris Review* last year.

The Perrotin show's title, "You Are a Serpent Who'll Return to the Ocean," comes from a phrase a stranger said to Orchard when she was in the hospital. "I repeated it to myself over and over, like a mantra," she recalls. She found it unsettling but somehow beautiful—a dissonance not unfamiliar to anyone going through the cycle of pregnancy and loss. Tweaked to the first person, the phrase is also the title of one of the works. Orchard had already started the nighttime beach scene that would become *I am a serpent who'll return to the ocean*, but she added a snake after the hospital encounter. Here we see Orchard's brilliant harnessing of light: The moonlight is striking against the foreground figure, her arms overhead in surrender.

The hefty dimensions (up to nine feet tall) of all but one of the works in "You Are a Serpent" is key—the women in the paintings may be going through it, but their scale gives them a certain strength. Inspired by the ancient caryatids Orchard saw in Greece last summer, her figures stretch to the edges of the canvases,



Danielle Orchard, *I Am a Serpent Who'll Return to the Ocean*, 2023. Photo: Guillaume Ziccarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.

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holding up the frame. In the mighty diptych *Sculptress*, Orchard plays with a creation metaphor: building up a family, whether from clay or your own body. As in all her work, the figures present throughout *Sculptress* are both Orchard and not her, representative of ideas or characters. “Are these people or are they artworks themselves?” Orchard asks. “That’s something I think applies to all my work.”

Filled with symbolism—the eggs and peaches; wilting flowers; a riff on Picasso’s *Bull’s Head* with the handlebars curved in, like fallopian tubes, in the lower right of *Sculptress*—

Orchard doesn’t hide what’s going on. There’s a tenderness and warmth to laying bare what society expects women to hide. And with maternal health and reproductive rights under current threat, these works take on a wider urgency.

Art reflects life, and life is beauty and pain, joy and sorrow, birth and death. Danielle Orchard shows us it’s worth painting all of it.

“You Are a Serpent Who’ll Return to the Ocean” is on view at Perrotin New York, 130 Orchard Street, through June 10, 2023.



Danielle Orchard, *Le Cauchemar*, 2023. Photo: Guillaume Zicarelli. Courtesy of the artist and Perrotin.